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The Plight of Education in Afghanistan

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During the past five years, Afghanistan has come along way to providing educational opportunities to its youth. Under the tyranny of the Taliban, according to the World Bank estimate there were only 774,000 boys were attending school in 2001. In contrast, by 2003, 7,000 schools began operating in more 20 provinces educating 3 million boy and 1.2 million girls. Now with the beginning of the academic year in March 2007, there are more than 7 million boys and girls attending school in Afghanistan. These numbers represent a remarkable improvement from the dark era of the Taliban. Indeed, more Afghan children are in school today than at any other period in Afghanistan’s history.

On the other hand as one begin to look at educational need of the country, the tremendous gap between the need and availability of education becomes very apparent. Although there seven million students who are attending school today, there are over seven million additional children that are out of school. The picture is even bleaker for girls; for instance, while in Kabul and Herat girls 58% and 35% of school age girls attend school, in the Eastern and Southern provinces girls constitute less than 20% of the students. In the three southern provinces girl, enrollment drops to 7% in Khost, 5% in Helmand, and 3% in Zabul.

Although modest investments have been made in reconstruction of the education physical infrastructure, the need has outpaced the resources in a significant manner. For instance, although there roughly 9,000 schools in Afghanistan, less than one third have any dedicated buildings, and one third of has no building where classes are held in open air or under a tent.

The conditions for higher education are quite similar. While the number of college students has jumped from 4,000 all male students in 2001 to 42,000 students – 20% are women- less than 15% of the population has any access to higher education. This is one of the lowest percentages in the world. The total operating budget of all colleges and universities in Afghanistan is \$16M, where 65% of the funds are used to cover housing

and feeding the students. Therefore, less than \$135 is spent per student per year. The need for capital construction and instructional equipment is tremendous.

It is estimated that by 2014 there will be one million high school graduates, but the system is woefully under-funded to meet current needs let alone addressing the long-term requirements.

In the past 20 months there has been a new challenge that the education sector is facing. Since early 2005, the Taliban insurgency has begun a campaign against schools in Afghanistan. There have been numerous missile attacks, explosion, and burning of schools. In 2006 there were more than 300 schools that were shut down because of the Taliban attacks. Hundred of teachers have been attacked and injured that have resulted in several teachers being killed at these events. Simply put, after destroying economic infrastructure and historical monuments of Afghanistan including the Bamiyan Buddah statue in the late 1990's, now the Taliban are trying to destroy one of the few remaining assets of Afghanistan, namely its human capital and the opportunity for getting an education..

Today, education is very critical in enhancing the quality of people's lives everywhere in the world. For instance, an additional year of education for girls can reduce infant mortality rate between 5 to 10 percent. Currently, Afghanistan has one of the highest infant mortality rates in the world, and the illiteracy rate among women is roughly 86 percent. So girl education can have many positive societal impacts beyond the very obvious ones. Moreover, it is estimated that close to 60 percent of the country's population is under the age of eighteen, which implies that Afghanistan has one of the youngest populations in the world. Lack of adequate educational opportunity makes the majority of the youth as potential recruits for Taliban and other extreme elements.

Last year Oxfam had made a call on international community to invest US\$ 563 million to rebuild schools in Afghanistan, while the amount of funds received from the developed nations is roughly US\$12 million per year. We hope the U.S. Congress and the international community will listen to the plight of the Afghan children and provide the funding to assist the education in Afghanistan. This investment will not only rebuild the needed human infrastructure in Afghanistan, it is an investment in stability of the region.

Our plea to everyone in the West is let us help the youth in Afghanistan realize their dreams. The youth in Afghanistan are facing a critical fork in the road. They could be carrying PDA's or Kalashnikovs. We can make a difference in this choice. Let us not disappoint them!

Thank you